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Opinion

Consumer satisfaction at heart of marketing resolutions

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BILL SUTTON

As a proponent for the sports consumer, I hereby offer five resolutions that if enacted would improve the consumers' experience and, ultimately, the providers' bottom line.

1. That sports organizations begin using their database capabilities to go beyond personalizing offers and demonstrate that they know what is important and relevant to their customers.

The NBA recently tested this strategy. At its annual marketing meetings in Orlando, instead of giving the same welcome gift to each team president, the league's marketing and business operations group did some research into each president to learn his hobbies and recreational pursuits.

For example, Russ Bookbinder of the San Antonio Spurs is an avid diver. His gift was a book listing the 60 best dive sites.

2. That sports organizations examine their sales and marketing practices to better understand how those practices can be more convenient for the consumer.

It is common for consumers in Europe and Asia to use their cell phones or PDAs to make purchases at sporting venues and merchandise stores. Why are sports organizations in the United States so far behind?

In our sports venues, the lines at the cash machines and concession stands are often so long that consumers abandon their purchase plans. We need to implement more smart-card and wireless technology options to make the purchasing experiences faster and more convenient and efficient.

3. That the sports viewing public, through the extensive use of remote control and TiVo devices, sends the following message to sports organizations and their broadcast partners: We don't watch commercials during sporting events (except the Super Bowl) because there are too many of them, they are redundant and they are beginning to alter the course of our games.

I had the thrilling experience of attending the USC-Notre Dame football game last fall — a game that took more than four hours to complete.

Earlier this month, I watched my beloved Pittsburgh Steelers defeat the Cincinnati Bengals. With me was Grant McKenzie, a marketing manager for professional rugby from New Zealand.

McKenzie marveled at the number of commercials, and was astonished that the game took nearly three hours to play. At rugby matches, he said, the signs surrounding the field obviate the need for commercials. He may have a point.

Perhaps we should consider a frame with a commercial message around the televised action. Or better yet, sponsors for the individual quarters or innings of the games: 60-second commercials to begin and end the period and then uninterrupted action unless the teams elect to use a time out.

It has worked in non-sport programming, so why not here? And wouldn't one well-thought-out message that viewers would actually watch be worth the change? Maybe less could be more.

4. That sports management and sports business degree programs require sales courses in their undergraduate and graduate curriculums. In this case, the consumers are the students enrolling in the degree programs and the sport industry itself, which seeks to add talent to its ranks every year.

The majority of entry-level positions, and in fact the majority of positions in most sport organizations,



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are sales or sales-support positions. How can these degree programs ignore the best potential employment opportunities for their students?

The Detroit Pistons, Orlando Magic, Cleveland Cavaliers and Pittsburgh Pirates have historically worked with students to provide sales projects while the students are in school. It is a certainty that collegiate athletic departments, minor league sports and the remainder of the major-league-level sports would be more than happy to work with faculty to design class projects and assist in the development (and perhaps the teaching) of sales-based course work.

5. That sports organizations take a more holistic approach to building and renovating facilities that addresses the interests and preferences of the entire consumer base and not the most lucrative spenders.

Sports organizations have been more than willing to improve the yield from their highest-paying patrons and sponsors. This is a sound and logical business practice and should continue as long as the interest and market demand are there.

The thinking, however, should be longer term about establishing, expanding and strengthening bonds with the fans of tomorrow. Today's youth will not be content to be spectators, but will demand more of a personal, interactive and enjoyable role.

The Spurs' HEB Fan Fiesta Plaza and the Phoenix Suns' Verizon Wireless Jungle are examples of children's interactive areas that expand the venue into an entertainment destination as well as afford a great activation platform for sponsors to interface with potential consumers.

They also provide an area for the team and its greatest marketing assets (the players) to engage young fans in a meaningful and interactive way, where first impressions and memories are created.

The most effective way to reach the consumer's wallet is to start at the heart and move to the mind: Feel it, consider it and do it. Let's try to make our marketing more heartfelt in 2006.

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